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ABSTRACT

The use of text classification as a strategy in the training of translators is discussed. Frequently, translator trainees are required to complete a text profile classifying the text on dimensions such as purpose, formality, difficulty, and emotional tone. It is argued that the empirical basis for such classification is very shaky, but could be made more secure by three types of experiments: (1) verification of validity and interrater reliability on the categories used; (2) tests of statistical and logical (or psychological) interdeperdence of the various dimensions; and (3) examination of the extent to which translators at various levels actually use text analysis when making decisions about translation. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/MSE)

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Research to Inform Advanced FL Courses Involving Translation: An Immodest Proposal

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RESEARCH TO INFORM ADVANCED FL COURSES INVOLVING TRANSLATION:AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

Brian Parkinson (IALS)

Abstract

In many classes the teaching of translation includes completion by students of a text profile classifying the text on dimensions such as purpose,formality,difficulty,emotional tone.The empirical basis for such classification is very shaky, and could be made more secure by three types of experiment.The first would involve checking validity and inter-rater reliability on the categories used; the second would test the statistical and logical (or psychological) independence of the various dimensions; the third would examine to what extent translators at various levels actually use text analysis when making decisions about translation.

1 Introductory Notes

This article is slightly unusual for EWPAL in that it does not describe research done or begun, nor even outline a programme which the writer himself proposes to undertake; instead it seeks to outline a whole area for research, seemingly almost unexplored, far too big for one person to explore, but demanding exploration if the teaching of advanced language courses involving translation is to be put on a sounder footing.I hope for three kinds of response from readers: suggested modifications to the proposed dimensions and research questions, information on any research already done in these areas, and new research in some of the areas outlined.

My interest is not primarily in translation theory but in foreign language teaching, which I engage with both as a classroom teacher and as a practitioner of empirical teaching-related applied linguistics (or *pédagogie de la langue*). If this bias or my ignorance has led to any distortion of translation theory, I look forward to being corrected.

2 The Content of Translation Classes

Translation forms a large part of many language courses world-wide. Usually - at least on the anecdotal evidence available - the activity seems to be conducted in a non-theoretical and non-communicative way: it is simply a vehicle for teaching vocabulary, grammar and idiom,or at best a pretext for providing useful input, and there is no systematic consideration of issues of principle.

Alongside these 'practical translation' classes there have been, for many centuries but especially in the last 50 years, attempts to systematise the study and practice of translation as an autonomous discipline, under a variety of names: "translatogy", "traductology", "translation studies", "translation theory", "science of translation" are five common variants in English alone. Except in a few specialist centres (mostly in Germany), however, these have had remarkably little direct influence on bread-and-butter translation classes in schools and universities. Even the relatively few academics who write about translation in books and journals seem usually not to employ their theoretical apparatus, at least not directly or recognisably, in their own classes. The situation may be analogous to that in literary theory, where many academics publish research wholly or partly based on theories such as structuralism, deconstructionism etc., but stick to non-theoretical 'practical criticism' with their own students. There may be several reasons for this apparent schizophrenia: my own literature reviews (see e.g. Parkinson 1995a) suggest, firstly, that many

books on translation are mistake-ridden and of poor quality, secondly, that German 'translation science' and other rival 'ologies' are narrowly historically situated and limited in various ways , (see Gentzler 1993), thirdly, that even good work under the label 'translation' may be of more interest for other disciplines than to translators (see e.g. Venuti 1992), and finally that many ideas in these books may, when empirical testing is attempted, be either falsified or revealed as unfalsifiable and therefore empirically empty.

Of more influence in the classroom than heavily theoretical publications have been books in another tradition, associated especially with Nida and Newmark: if EFL students at IALS have read anything on translation it is nearly always Newmark 1981 and/or Newmark 1988, whilst ideas in Nida and Taber 1969 are familiar at second hand through Newmark. Whilst writers in this tradition do not reject theory, their books are all more or else practical, based on the real work of professional translators (Nida in bible translation, Newmark in many fields including medicine), and can be used as a source of practical 'tips', especially for *teachers* of translation .

Research on teachers has often suggested that 'tips' are precisely what they want most: they resist innovations which involve fundamental re-appraisal of concepts, objectives and relationships, but embrace those which simply give them something else to do in the classroom. Thus, for example, pair work was a relatively popular and unproblematic innovation in certain classes in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas *differentiated* pair-work and diagnostic testing met far more resistance (see e.g. Brown et al. 1976, Parkinson et al. 1981, and others in the same series). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one idea promulgated in the books of Nida and Newmark (and a few others) does crop up in most of those translation classes - at least of those represented by students and teachers who come to IALS - which are not merely a continuation of grammar by other means. This 'tip' or 'trick' is that of getting the students to analyse a text before translation, and to locate it on a number of scales or nominal-category sets. For example Newmark (1988) offers dimensions such as 'intention', 'style' (after Nida), 'readership', 'formality', 'generality/difficulty', 'emotional tone', 'attitude' and 'setting'. In my own classes I sometimes ask participants to fill in a proforma which , in its latest version (see Parkinson 1995b), includes the categories 'purpose', 'formality', 'register', 'generality/difficulty' and 'tone/attitude', with descriptions or examples for at least some of the choices on each scale. Systems already known to course participants, or developed by them for their own work as students, teachers or commercial translators, may be more or less elaborate , but almost all are broadly similar, which may be a tribute to the genius of Newmark, or may show that there are only a limited number of reasonable ways to classify a text, or something between the two.

3. Three Problems with Text Analysis Proformas

Although I am an ever more enthusiastic user of preliminary text analysis in translation classes, and receive positive feedback from participants, I have become aware of problems with the approach, falling into three categories.

The first problem is that of construct validity and reliability. Can everyone agree on how formal or difficult a text is, on its purpose and tone, and so on? Or more realistically, is there a reasonable measure of agreement between suitably qualified judges? And who decides what is reasonable, and who is suitably qualified?

I had already explored similar ground in Parkinson 1990, which sought native-speaker validation for judgements of literary categories, specifically deviance, as a guide for non-native learners on an English For Literary Studies course, and found a surprising lack of agreement. Failing to learn from this, I expected at least a fair measure of educated native-speaker agreement in the categorisation of most texts on most dimensions in Newmark's list or my own modification thereof, but in writing the draft of Parkinson 1995b I found this assumption to be over-optimistic. For example, I thought that a text in the *Daily Mail* criticising striking railway unions (Norris 1994) was a clear and uncontroversial example of the

purpose or intention of 'persuading', hoping to turn the reader (more) against the unions, who 'deliver a kick in the teeth to commuters', 'aim to cause the maximum possible disruption', 'turn the screw' and so on, whilst the employers, whose views are quoted or directly stated eleven times to the workers' none, are 'furious' and their 'patience is running out'. Readers of my draft agreed with my analysis but not with my conclusion. They thought that the article, and others of similar type in the *Daily Mail*, *Spectator* and other politically extreme publications, were rather examples of Jakobson's (e.g. 1973) 'expressive' function, which covers language which is speaker-oriented, produced to satisfy one's own needs, for example singing in the bath. The argument seems to be that readers of such papers do not need to be persuaded, that they share the writer's views, and that producing and consuming an attack on the class enemy is some sort of cathartic ritual. This is just one of many examples of different categorisations even by judges with rather similar academic, political and social values: if I invited *Daily Mail* readers to add their own judgements, I am almost certain that inter-rater reliability on most dimensions would be even lower.

The second problem - perhaps just an aspect of the first - is that the number of separate dimensions can sometimes make the analysis unwieldy and excessively time-consuming, and there may be doubts as to whether so many categories are really necessary. This is partly a question of construct validity, partly of practicality. Can one make a clear distinction between, say, generality and difficulty, or emotional tone and writer attitude, and even if one can do so is the game worth the candle? A typical system used by some of our students may have ten categories with about four choices in each, allowing about one million combinations: is it helpful to allow for all logical possibilities in this way, or do categories usually co-occur in such a way that one can identify,say, fifty 'profiles' of common combinations?

The third problem began to crystallise for me when an IALS student wrote about her translation course at home: we do all this text analysis, we fill in the tables from Newmark, but then we don't use it. We just translate the text without using this, in the way we always have done'.I have since found that such perceptions are common, at least with reference to the few overseas courses about which I have been able to inquire. The smugness which this engendered lasted for only a few weeks, to be replaced by the sudden thought that other students might be telling their teachers at home exactly the same thing about my course! To be sure, I believed that my colleagues and I had integrated text analysis and translation as a seamless whole, and that we used (or, more usually, helped participants to use) ideas from the former in the latter, but memories of some of my own recent translation classes suggested that this reference back was rarer and less systematic than I might like to admit.

My next question was 'Does it matter?'. Perhaps text analysis before translation is and needs to be no more than a pedagogical 'tip' or 'trick', a convenient way to get a class started, establish the right atmosphere, learn some general language, introduce the text slowly and comfortably?Perhaps it has very limited effect on each individual decision at the translation stage? I did not convince myself, because I could think of numerous cases where I thought general text analysis should influence a local translation decision, but perhaps one should not teach this way, perhaps students should try translating 'cold', or at most after a general reading and discussion of vocabulary and content, and move from the local to the global rather than vice versa? I do not like such a conclusion, but am persuaded that this problem area, like the other two, is one in which 'research is needed' is more than a cliché.

4. <u>What form should research on these problems take?</u>

All teachers are informal researchers, and now that I have formulated the problem I shall inevitably seek solutions by, as a minimum, informal evidence-gathering and reflection. A more formal research study, especially one which related pedagogic practice to the behaviour of commercial translators and of monolingual text consumers, might be done as a large-scale enterprise involving several different languages and educational or translation contexts. There follow some suggestions on how the three problem areas identified above might be illuminated by such research.

(i) To investigate construct validity, texts in each language studied should be read by (at least 20?) native-speakers and advanced non-natives, who should be asked to classify them using dimensions and categories such as the following:-

(primary) purpose:	informative, persuasive, phatic, expressive..... (Jakobson e.g. 1973)
formality:	officialese - official - formal - neutral - informal - colloquial - slang - taboo (Newmark e.g. 1988)
register:	general, astronomy, chess etc.
generality/difficulty:	simple - popular - neutral - educated - technical - opaque (Newmark e.g. 1988)

The experiment could be widened in two ways: by expanding the sample to include e.g. qualified translators, linguistics lecturers, translation teachers, other academics, office workers (20 of each?) and/or by giving several equivalent groups different amounts of guidance and examples. The hypothesis would be that classification on most categories would not be reliable for all groups under all conditions, but would become more reliable as group expertise and amount of guidance increased. This would not prove the validity of the categories, as research consumers might choose not to accept the authority of the 'experts' and/or the validity of the guidance, but it would provide a factual basis for decision-making.

(ii) The issue of 'too many dimensions' could be explored in several ways. A crude sociometric approach would be through factor analysis or even simple correlation: if two dimensions have very high correlation, it may not be worth separating them. Secondly, researchers could modify or invent texts with abnormal combinations of, say, 'writer attitude' and 'emotional tone', and test whether subjects are in fact willing to categorise them independently. Thirdly, subjects could be asked how far a text with such a combination is

(a) imaginable in principle and

(b) possible or likely in the real world.

Many other experiments on these lines are easily proposed.

(iii) The issue of whether and how text analysis can in practice affect translations is the biggest of the three, and only a small number of the many promising research channels will be mentioned here. The translation behaviour of professional translators, teachers and students who use text analysis proformas could be explored by questionnaires, interviews, think-aloud protocols (real-time and recall) and inspection of the written product. In the realms of invented or modified texts, paragraphs for translation could be presented to different groups with a different preceding paragraph (e.g. formal or informal, 'warm' or 'cold' language), or with different background information ("this is part of a love letter/religious sermon") and the effects, if any, measured.

5. Conclusion

Hatim and Mason (1990) claim that ' There is a real sense in which it is translators who are providing us with the evidence for what we know about translating.' (p. xi) but admit that 'studies in this area are still in their infancy.' (ibid.). The present paper is based on the belief that we have very little secure knowledge of what translators at various levels actually do, and that it is high time we began to find out.

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